

## **Grade 3 - Informational**

### **Nebraska's National Forests**

Today, there are over one million acres of land in central and western Nebraska that are identified as being part of a national forest. The national forests in Nebraska are different compared to other national forests in the country because they were planted by hand. In fact, the Nebraska National Forests are the largest hand-planted forests in North America.

#### **An Idea**

The Nebraska National Forests began as the idea of Dr. Charles E. Bessey, a professor at the University of Nebraska. He wanted to plant a forest in Nebraska's Sandhills. Although several people disagreed with Bessey, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) allowed Bessey to complete a tree-planting experiment in this area in 1891.

Bessey would need to find the land, but the USDA would provide the trees to be planted. Bessey knew a family who agreed to let part of their land be used for the experiment. The land was prepared and the trees were planted, but many did not last. Since there was little success, the tree-planting experiment ended.

Ten years later, Gifford Pinchot visited the Sandhills. He hoped to show that the area could contribute to protecting wildlife and other natural resources, such as water. He was surprised to discover several pine trees growing in the areas where Bessey had first planted trees.

In 1901, Pinchot recommended that President Theodore Roosevelt set aside two treeless sections of land in the Sandhills as national forests. In 1902, Roosevelt created what are known today as the Bessey Ranger District and the Samuel McKelvie National Forest.

#### **A Difficult Task**

The task of planting forests required a large amount of time and energy. The Forest Service cleared several acres of land for a nursery, or area where young tree seedlings could grow. Several seedlings from different states were also collected and planted in 1903. After about two years, forest rangers learned that the seedlings raised at the nursery grew better than those that came from other states.

The dry air and prairie fires presented a challenge when trying to plant trees on the Great Plains. In 1910, several acres of trees were burned by a prairie fire. The forest rangers did not give up. They replanted trees from the nursery in the hopes of replacing the trees that had been damaged by the fire.

## The Growth of the Forests

In the 1950s, the Pine Ridge District was added as a national forest. This forest is located near Chadron, Nebraska in the northwest section of the state. The area has sloping grassland, steep canyons, and sharp ridges.

Today, the Charles E. Bessey Nursery is the oldest seedling nursery operated by the USDA Forest Service. It is the leader in seedling production, growing 2.5 to 3 million seedlings each year. Some of these seedlings are given to other national forests and state agencies in the Great Plains and the West.

## Activities at the Forests

Thousands of people visit the Nebraska National Forests. Some come to see the nursery; others enjoy biking, camping, and horseback riding.

Some visitors come to view the wildlife that can be found. Visitors might catch a glimpse of wild turkeys, sharp-tailed grouse, black-tailed prairie dogs, or black-footed ferrets. The Nebraska Forest Service is actively involved in a recovery program to help the endangered black-footed ferret.

What some viewed as impossible has turned out to be a great success. For over 100 years, forests have grown in Nebraska's Sandhills.

